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IN DEFENSE OF TRANSLATION

Nothing succeeds like success, and the direct method, which not so long ago was still clamoring for a place in the sun, is now rapidly getting to the point where it will decide who else is to be in the sun, if anyone. This success has been remarkable and surely bears eloquent witness to the soundness of the principle which underlies the attempted reform of our modern language teaching.

There is, however, an element of danger in so rapid an advance. Our direct-method enthusiasts must naturally feel that they have received a popular mandate to pursue their reform to its fullest consummation; and they would be more than human if, in the flush of victory, they were not tempted to take every advantage which their present favorable position affords. But power involves responsibility; and moreover, an excessive use of such power would undoubtedly in the end prove detrimental to the best interests of the direct method itself. We should be too conscious of the diversity of human nature to wish to put all teaching into any uniform; and it cannot be too strongly insisted upon that the character and peculiar aptitudes of the individual teacher must be the principal determining factor in any choice of teaching methods.

Speaking in a strictly practical sense, it may be said that if we express the amounts of time devoted respectively to oral work and translation by a ratio as $\frac{x}{y}$, then we approach the ideal, of pure, direct method as y approaches zero. Thus for many a teacher the problem of the direct method means in practice the problem of translation. It is then significant that so far most formulations of the fundamentals of the direct method have called for a reduction of translation, but not its total abolition, thus not only admitting a certain survival value in the exercise, but also allowing the teacher some latitude of choice.

Nevertheless, it appears that the very idea of the direct method is hostile to the survival of translation, and there can be no doubt that we shall soon hear many voices calling not merely, as now, for "reduction of translation to a minimum," but for the total abandonment of every form of translation in the class-room. I am frank to say that such abandonment seems to me not only impossible—I use the term advisedly—but undesirable; and I wish to point out, as concisely as may be, some merits of translation not shared by any other pedagogical device, or at least not in any comparable measure.

In the first place, translation is our supreme *disciplinary* exercise. It is both exact and exacting, and one might call it the mathematics of language study. Without pushing the figure too hard, one might say that the task of translating any given bit of writing represents a problem to which there is but one perfect—or at any rate, ideal—solution. It must be obvious that there can be no more salutary disciplinary exercise than the requirement to find the solution: for the difficulty of the task naturally stimulates the ambitious student and the sluggard alike, though not for the same reason.

I have been conducting a class of beginners this year, with whom I do a good deal of oral work. They write German answers to German questions very well, some of them faultlessly, but I can count on the fingers of one hand those who make anything like perfect records in translating English sentences into German. The comment of the "reformers" is: you see, your translation is unnatural, or your students would not have so much difficulty with it. To this I would reply: it has always been borne in upon me that the learning of a foreign tongue, especially German, is an arduous affair, and I distrust *a priori* the discipline of any task which half of an average class can do without considerable error.

In the second place, translation is our supreme *cultural* or *aesthetic* exercise. If by our education we aim at something more than the storing of the mind with useful knowledge; if we also desire to develop the highest mental powers and capabilities of our students; then surely translation may claim an honorable place in our curriculum. For it demands, even from the very first, much more than the mere mechanical assembling of memory-data which bulks so large in our elementary teaching: it requires

judgment, taste, and skill, rapidity of thought, and the most intense concentration of the attention. Indeed, I know few tasks that demand more sheer brains of the student than, for example, the rapid, idiomatic, oral translation of a typical passage from *Wilhelm Tell*. The student who does it at all has acquired something that he can never wholly lose again; the student who does it well has begun to achieve the aesthetic sense.

Third, translation is almost the only *literary* exercise open to an elementary class. I hear someone say: our business is to teach the languages, not to do literary exercises. But surely we do not wish to restrict ourselves more than is needful; or, to put it another way, should we reject anything that makes our work richer and fuller? After all, if we learn languages, it is not merely because they are useful things to know, and may perhaps increase our earning power, but largely because they open the way to great literatures, in which men of other nations have given expression to great thoughts and high aspirations that have moulded the plastic intellects of the world. It has been suggested that the ultimate reason for the failure of the so-called universal languages, such as Volapük and Esperanto, is that there is no pure literature to which they give access. If then we do not wish to slight the literary aspects of our reading, translation should not be lightly banished from the class-room. To mention only one aspect of the matter, a highly important characteristic of literature is the quality called style; how can we better lead the student to an appreciation of such values in a foreign language than in connection with his efforts to translate? The same applies to poetry. We have not infrequently been invited to shudder at the horror of translating a lyric poem in class: yet it is my firm conviction that nothing will so impress its beauty on a pupil's not very observant mind as his own desperate attempts to preserve its elusive quality in an English rendering. On the other hand, is it well to treat all our reading—*Immensee*, *Hermann und Dorothea*, *Wilhelm Tell*—simply as a *story*, a plot, a series of incidents to be reproduced in the student's halting German? Surely Storm and Goethe and Schiller have deserved something better even of the teacher in the high school.

Fourth, translation is the principal contribution we can make to the student's knowledge and command of English. I hear the

same voice say: we are teaching German, let the English teacher look to his own. Yet not so readily may we shake off the responsibilities that unalterable conditions lay upon us. More and more, as we can daily see, the ancient languages are slipping, slipping from the high school curriculum. Whether we desire it or not, some of the cultural burdens which they have borne through many centuries are bound to fall on us, teachers of modern languages; and if we are really humanists at heart, if we are concerned lest the cultural values which language study represents shall be lost to a world drenched in practicality and materialism, shall we not gladly take up the loads that our colleagues were proud to shoulder? The Latin teacher has had to teach English grammar; now we find that we must do it. Must, I say: for we cannot teach German with any effectiveness to a generation that is innocent of the distinction between a participle and an infinitive, a prefix and a preposition, a pronoun and an adjective. It is in translation that such confusion of mind is most promptly and glaringly displayed, and can most readily be corrected; indeed, I would go so far as to say that really good translation is not possible to him who is astray on his grammar. And if in teaching German grammar we inevitably strengthen the student's grasp on his mother tongue, still more, in translating, do we strengthen his English vocabulary. Not only do we force him to make his own many words which would otherwise be remote from his immediate needs, numbers of which will remain to enrich his passive vocabulary, at least; but we help him to clarify his verbal knowledge in both languages. As I said before, translation is exacting and exact: looseness or haziness of thought, in either German or English, will show almost immediately in carefully conducted translation work, and can then be effectively and promptly controlled.

Fifth, translation is the quickest, and frequently the only way of determining the accuracy of a student's preparation. Ardent other-methodists have often disputed this, but it seems to me really beyond dispute. Some of my readers may recall the predicament in which Mark Twain once found himself, when called upon to deliver a fourth of July oration on German: "Sie müssen so freundlich sein, und verzeih mich die interlarding von ein oder zwei Englischer Worte, hie und da, denn ich finde, dass die deutsche

is not a very copious language, and so when you've really got anything to say, you've got to draw on a language that can stand the strain." Now, the American student, in attacking a foreign text, is in much the same situation. If you want to find out what he really knows about a given passage, you must get him to tell you in a language which, for him, can stand the strain. Let me enforce this principle by a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*.

It has been my privilege in the last few years to examine a considerable number of translations from the German. There can be no question, I should say, that almost any of the translators could have passed a perfect oral examination on the work translated: the resources of the question-method could have been exhausted without catching them in error. But a careful comparison of their translations with the original showed beyond the possibility of a doubt that they had actually misunderstood their author, for the English which they used to render him did not mean what he had said. What is true of the professional translator is true in a proportional degree of the student; and one class of students is particularly apt to escape our vigilance if we do nothing but oral work and free composition.

This brings me to my sixth point: the almost inestimable value of translation in dealing with the very difficult problem of the German-American. I think most experienced teachers will agree that it is comparatively easy to teach a youth who knows nothing but is eager to learn; but that there are few tasks more trying than that of attempting to teach a boy who balks because he thinks he knows more than the teacher, but who is really grossly ignorant, or, worse yet, knows a lot that isn't so. Teachers in the Middle West are constantly struggling with German-born pupils of this type. They pronounce easily and well, they have gained at home a certain natural feeling for German sentence order, grammatical gender, and, in rare cases, even for cases and forms; hence oral work is child's play to them. Yet their actual knowledge is often of the most superficial. As one of them once naively said to me, when graded severely for inaccurate translation: "Well, I have a kind of vague idea what it means."

For such pupils there is no more useful or salutary exercise than translation. For one thing, if the teacher is really competent—which is my constant assumption—it offers incomparable oppor-

tunities for showing the pupil at the very outset just how limited and imperfect his knowledge really is. The chastening effect of strictly conducted translation on the cocksure boy whose grandmother came over in the 50's, and who has "a kind of a vague idea what it means," is a perfect godsend to the American-born teacher. But more than that: the systematic, orderly, definite nature of the translation exercise affords the very best opportunity of really teaching the German-American, who finds it difficult to ascertain just how much he does not know; for the necessity of exact thinking which it imposes upon him very soon forms a foundation of assured and definite knowledge upon which a handsome superstructure can be securely erected.

Seventh and last, I address myself to a practical aspect of the question—with some reluctance, for the emphasis on utilitarian considerations in language study too easily obscures the really fundamental aims of our work. But I suppose it is both legitimate and effective to turn an enemy's guns upon himself, and so I make bold to say that from a practical point of view translation need not yield to any other part of our class-room work. Much has been said about the beauty and value of thinking in the foreign language, and for the foreigner who wishes to feel at home in Germany or France, there can be no question that this facility will become a necessity. But I submit that the student of a foreign tongue who expects to spend his days in this country is in a totally different situation. His whole surroundings are English, the majority of his associates speak English, his whole daily life, one might say, is couched in English. So long as he thinks his own original thoughts, he may indeed think in German or French; but many of his thoughts come from the world around him. It must be perfectly evident that those of us who, not native to the foreign tongue, try to use it in our every-day speech, are constantly being forced to find German equivalents for English ideas—and many a knotty problem we encounter in so doing. The translating instinct sets in very early. I am acquainted with a little boy who speaks Dutch with his father, English with his mother. One day his father cut the bread in a different way and called the boy's attention to it, using the word *manier*, which when rapidly pronounced sounds quite like *mynheer*. Turning to his mother, the boy said, "See the new mister daddy has of cutting the bread."

No one had taught the child to translate: it was forced on him by the situation. I contend that drill in translation is surely a thoroughly practical exercise for the American high school or college boy.

It is remote from my purpose, and would unduly expand this article, to discuss the methods of handling translation in the class-room. I cannot refrain, however, from protesting against the assumption that teaching by translation is the refuge of the incompetent—it is as true as the insinuation that many a person sits in a professor's chair because he could earn his salt nowhere else. I do not call it teaching to hold a book and listen to a class recite. I admit that there is a very deplorable amount of bad teaching by the translation method, but if there is relatively more good direct-method teaching—which I will concede—it may be in part due to the fact that such teachers have generally had special training for their work, whereas many of the conservatives had only the training that the actual discipline of the class-room brings with it.

Let me say in conclusion, to prevent any possible misunderstanding, that I am not attacking the so-called direct method, whose value I concede, but merely attempting to show the merits of translation as a pedagogical device, which I find either minimized or denied outright. I am concerned lest the value of translation, the most important aspects of which I have attempted to outline, should be lost sight of in the enthusiasm for the newer teaching methods. In view of the considerations above advanced, I think it is not too much to say that translation is a type of exercise which we can ill afford to banish from the class-room.

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